

## First in Defense

# A History of USS Forrestal (CVA/CV/AVT 59)

By Steven D. Hill

On July 1 1945, the United States Navy had a total of 28 fast carriers in commission: 20 *Essex*-class CVs and 8 *Independence*-class CVLs. These carriers embarked an effective mix of aircraft which enabled the fleet to perform a vast array of missions. This powerful armada, however, was already obsolete; although the aircraft onboard the carriers were excellent machines, they were all powered by piston engines. In the skies over Germany, Army Air Force escort fighters had already had a tough job trying to protect the heavy bombers from the Luftwaffe's Messerschmitt Me 262, the first operational jet fighter, since the type was introduced during the summer of 1944. Clearly jet aircraft were the way of the future, but for the Navy the problem was developing a jet that could effectively and safely operate from the deck of an aircraft carrier, with the same high performance as its land-based counterpart.

After the war, on 18 July 1947, President Truman signed the National Security Act, which among other things, aligned the Army and Navy under the Department of Defense. It also established the Air Force as a separate branch, equal to the Army and Navy. The roles and missions of the the services were the subject of fierce debate over the next two years, and climaxed in what came to be known as the "Revolt of the Admirals."

At this time, a war was being waged in Washington, D.C., between the Air Force and the Navy involving the operational employment of the new atomic arsenal. The Navy was attempting to convince Congress that its carriers could deliver atomic bombs just as effectively as the Air Force could with its land-based bombers. The Navy proposed to construct a huge flush-deck aircraft carrier capable of operating a heavy attack aircraft. The proposed carrier, *United States* (CV 58), was approved and was laid down. The Air

Force, however, was adamant that priority should be given to its gigantic Convair B-36, an intercontinental strategic bomber, known later as the *Peacemaker*. The fate of CV 58 was sealed on 27 March 1949 when Secretary of Defense James V. Forrestal resigned. Forrestal had been a key supporter of the new carrier, but his successor, Louis Johnson, was not allied to the Navy's cause and canceled the *United States* on 23 April 1949. Secretary of the Navy John L. Sullivan resigned in protest. The strategic bombing role was awarded to the Air Force and for the time being the issue seemed to be resolved.

Back in the fleet, early operational test and evaluation of jet fighters aboard the *Essex* and *Midway*-class carriers indicated that the interim mix of piston and jet aircraft was far from ideal. With the difference in speed between the types, and the enormous fuel consumption of the jets, flight operations were complicated and required careful planning. Above all, safety was being compromised. It soon became clear that the *Essex* and *Midway*-class carriers, little changed since WW II, would require extensive refits in order to safely operate jets.

One major problem with early jets that had an enormous impact on safety was very quickly identified. Early jet aircraft suffered from poor engine response to throttle inputs by the pilot. Whereas piston engines responded rapidly to requests for full power, the jet engines required time to "spool up." Rapid throttle response was mandatory for aircraft landing on carriers at sea. Increased danger was also experienced because of the straight-deck design of the *Essex* and *Midway*-class carriers. An aircraft could not go around if it failed to engage an arresting wire, and despite the series of barricades meant to protect the aircraft parked forward on the flight deck, collisions were common.

On 30 October 1950, the Secretary of the Navy approved a budget which included a request for a new aircraft carrier. This vessel eventually became *Forrestal* (CV 59). Her initial design was based on the concept of the canceled *United States*. She was originally to have been a flush decker with one catapult each on her starboard and port sides, and two catapults forward on her bow. The landing area was aft along the centerline of the flight deck. Three of the catapults were serviced by a deck edge elevator; a fourth elevator was positioned in the landing area along the centerline of the flight deck. Displacing in excess of 60,000 tons and with a length of 1,036 feet, *Forrestal* was huge. The driving factor behind her design was, again, the requirement for her to operate heavy attack aircraft, such as the *AJ Savage* and the forthcoming Douglas A3D *Skywarrior*.

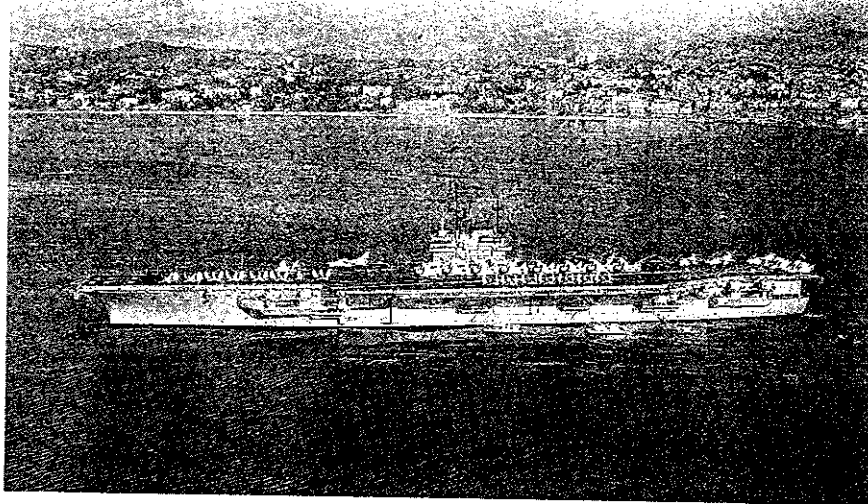
Early in her construction, *Forrestal's* design was altered in order to accommodate new technology that would eventually solve the safety problems experienced when operating jet aircraft from carriers. First, it was decided to incorporate an angled deck into her design. This meant aircraft on final approach would have an unobstructed path enabling them to either touch and go, bolter or trap. Second, steam catapults were installed vice the originally planned powder-charged ones. The steam catapults not only saved weight but had been tested and proven by the British on HMS *Perseus* during trials in August 1950. Interestingly, the three innovations that enabled the safe operation of jets aboard carriers – the angled deck, the steam catapult, and the mirror landing system – were all originated by the British. Yet, they eventually gave up on conventional fixed wing aircraft carriers, opting instead for V/STOL (vertical/short takeoff and landing) carriers,

a commitment that was regretted during the Falklands War in 1982.

*Forrestal*, with her enclosed hurricane bow and large port side sponson supporting her angled flight deck, was launched on 11 December 1954 by Newport News Shipbuilding and Drydock Company, Va. She was sponsored by Mrs. James V. Forrestal, widow of the former Secretary of Defense. On 1 October 1955, the carrier was commissioned, Captain R. L. Johnson commanding. The Navy now had a truly modern aircraft carrier capable of operating a broad spectrum of aircraft safely. *Forrestal's* design proved extremely sound and was the basis for all subsequent aircraft carriers built for the U.S. Navy.

*Forrestal's* operational history began in January of 1956 when aircraft of Air Task Group (ATG) 181 flew out to the new supercarrier to conduct carrier qualifications. On 3 January, Commander ATG-181, Commander Ralph L. Werner, made the first arrested landing aboard *Forrestal's* flight deck in a North American FJ-3 *Fury* of Fighter Squadron (VF) 21. Within an hour of *Forrestal's* first-ever arrested landing, her steam catapults were put to the test as Cdr. Werner's FJ-3 was launched from the starboard bow catapult.

Following her shakedown cruise with ATG-181 embarked, *Forrestal* responded to her first crisis. Egyptian President Gamel Abdel Nasser had nationalized the Suez Canal, thereby threatening French and British access to Middle Eastern oil. With the aid of the Israelis, the two colonial powers conspired to attack Egypt and remove Nasser from power. The United States' Sixth Fleet operating in the Mediterranean, led by carriers *Coral Sea* (CVA



*Forrestal*, with CVG-1 embarked, lies off the coast of southern France during her first Mediterranean cruise in 1957.

43) and *Randolph* (CVA 15), was ordered to be prepared for any contingency. Antisubmarine carrier *Antietam* (CVS 36) was also ordered to the area from Norway and *Forrestal*, with Carrier Air Group (CVG) 1 embarked, departed Norfolk, Va., on November 6. Tensions were extremely high and the possibility of a nuclear exchange was not entirely out of the question.

During the crisis, *Forrestal* operated in the eastern Atlantic and was ready to enter the Mediterranean should her services be required. The confrontation was soon resolved without a military engagement, and *Forrestal* returned to Norfolk, arriving on 12 December.

Preparations for *Forrestal's* first scheduled deployment resumed and on 15 January 1957 she sailed from Norfolk bound for the Mediterranean with CVG-1 embarked. During her early deployments with the Sixth Fleet, *Forrestal's* primary function was to show the flag. In this, her role was not unlike that of the ship-of-the-line during the days of sail. She made numerous port visits throughout the Mediterranean, demonstrating the

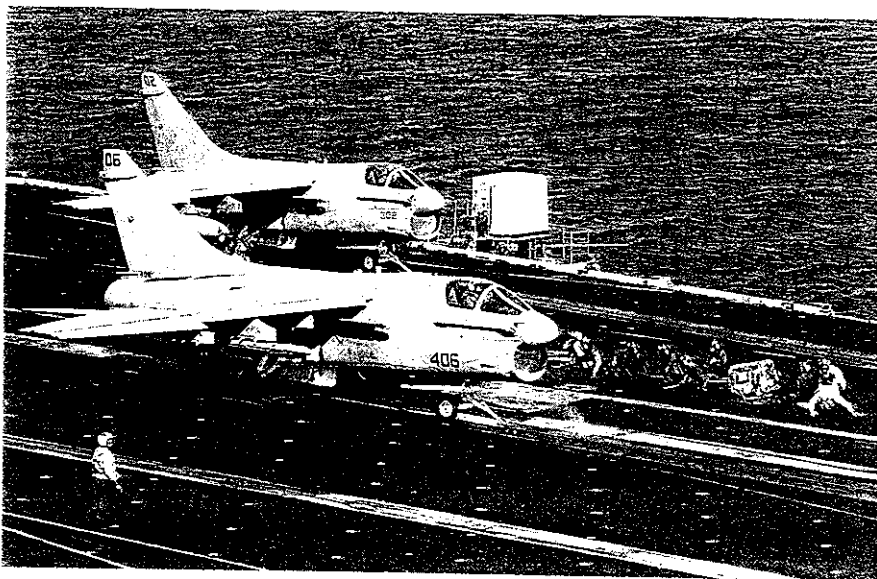
power for peace that she represented. *Forrestal* visited no less than 10 different ports on her first cruise and returned to Norfolk on 22 July.

In July 1958, a crisis in Lebanon developed, and President Eisenhower sent Marines ashore to stabilize the situation. As in the Suez Crisis in 1956, *Forrestal* deployed on short notice, embarking CVG-10 at Mayport, Fla., before heading toward the eastern Atlantic. Again, *Forrestal* was not called upon to engage in combat operations and she returned to Norfolk on 17 July.

As United States participation in the war in Vietnam began to escalate, the Navy began the practice of deploying Atlantic Fleet carriers to the Pacific in order to operate off Yankee Station in the Gulf of Tonkin. *Independence* (CV 62), with Carrier Air Wing (CVW) 7 embarked, was the first Atlantic Fleet flattop to do so, completing a WestPac/Vietnam cruise between 10 May and 13 December 1965. *Forrestal's* turn came in 1967.

On 6 June 1967, *Forrestal* departed Norfolk with CVW-17 embarked, which was well equipped for combat. Both fighter squadrons, VFs 74 and 11, operated the F-4B *Phantom II*, while the medium attack squadron, VA-65, brought its A-6A *Intruders* aboard. The light attack community was represented by VAs 46 and 106 each operating A-4E *Skyhawks*. Carrier Air Early Warning Squadron (VAW) 123 deployed with E-2A *Hawkeyes*, and Reconnaissance Attack Squadron 11 provided aerial reconnaissance with RA-5C *Vigilantes*.

A-7E Corsair IIs from VAs 37 and 105 prepare to launch from the deck of *Forrestal* during the carrier's first post-SLEP cruise in 1986.



Angelo Romano

Arriving on Yankee Station on 25 July, *Forrestal* immediately began launching aircraft of CVW-17 on their first combat sorties over North Vietnam. After four days of intense operations, *Forrestal* and CVW-17 had yet to lose a single aircraft over North Vietnam. The *Forrestal*/CVW-17 team was looking forward to a successful deployment.

The early morning of 29 July began with a strike. The second strike of the day was preparing to launch when a Zuni rocket mounted on an F-4B shot across the deck, impacting an armed A-4E's drop tank. A chain reaction sent debris, smoke and flame skyward as armed aircraft began to explode. Seven F-4B *Phantoms*, 12 A-4E *Skyhawks* and 2 RA-5C *Vigilantes* were destroyed. The most tragic loss of all were the 134 *Forrestal* crewman and CVW-17 personnel who died in the inferno.

*Forrestal* arrived at Cubi Point, R.P., on 31 July. Initial inspection of the smoldering carrier revealed seven holes in her flight deck caused by the general purpose bombs loaded on CVW-17 aircraft. Most of CVW-17 returned to the United States with *Forrestal*. VA-65, however, stayed on Yankee Station and continued to fight from the deck of *Constellation* (CVA 64).

Following her harrowing experience off the coast of Vietnam, and subsequent repairs, *Forrestal* resumed regular deployments to the Mediterranean and operations with the Sixth Fleet.

In July 1972, *Forrestal* welcomed the Grumman F-14A *Tomcat* to her deck. Carrier suitability trials for the new fleet defense fighter were conducted, though it was not until June 1986 that she began her first operational deployment with F-14A-equipped fighter squadrons.

Between January 1983 and May 1986, *Forrestal* participated in the Service Life Extension Program (SLEP), which is the most extensive refit possible for a carrier and is said to add an additional 30 years to the life of a ship. When *Forrestal* emerged, it seemed she easily would sail on into the 21st century.

On 2 June 1986, *Forrestal* got underway for her first post-SLEP deployment. CVW-6 was embarked for the supercarrier's eighteenth Mediterra-

nean cruise. The *Forrestal*/CVW-6 team subsequently completed two more Mediterranean deployments prior to August 1990.

On 12 April 1990, *Forrestal* and CVW-6 had just returned from another routine Mediterranean deployment. VAs 37 and 105, CVW-6's A-7E *Corsair II*-equipped light attack contingent, were preparing to disestablish. But the crisis in Iraq forced two other squadrons, VAs 46 and 72, to halt their transition to FA-18 *Hornets* and deploy to the Persian Gulf aboard *John F. Kennedy* (CV 67).

On 1 October, Strike Fighter Squadrons (VFA) 132 and 137, each equipped with FA-18A *Hornets*, officially joined CVW-6, filling the void created by the departure of VAs 37 and 105. CVW-6 had not operated with *Hornets* yet, and it would take time to integrate the new strike fighter into the air wing team.

Beginning 29 November, *Forrestal* and CVW-6 conducted refresher training and advanced/hostile phase training until 23 December. Then, three days after the air war against Iraq began on 17 January, *Forrestal*, with CVW-6 embarked, was ordered to deploy to southwest Asia. The deployment did not take place, however, and again *Forrestal* conducted advanced/hostile phase training for three weeks. When the ground war started, another order to deploy was issued, and again, several days later, was canceled.

In May, *Forrestal* and CVW-6 welcomed dependents aboard for a short day cruise off the coast of Florida. The cruise provided an excellent opportunity for the Navy to demonstrate to the public exactly what its carriers had been doing in the gulf. Among the day's most impressive participants were the *Kestrels* of VFA-137 under the command of Commander Craig B. "Slim" Henderson. The entire *Forrestal*/CVW-6 team looked professional and sharp. They had done an excellent job in preparing for a deployment to the Mediterranean and what was still an unstable and uncertain political climate in Iraq. Finally, on 30 May 1991, *Forrestal* departed Naval Station, Mayport, Fla., for what was to be her final voyage overseas.

Although the allied coalition had concluded combat operations against Iraq in March, Saddam Hussein, with

the military forces he had left, began an assault on the Kurds in the northern region of his country. The allies soon began air drops, supplying the besieged Kurds with food and other supplies under the code name Operation Provide Comfort.

*Forrestal*, with CVW-6 embarked, relieved *Theodore Roosevelt* (CVN 71) and CVW-8 on 14 June. Operations in support of Provide Comfort began immediately. On 8 July, an E-2C from VAW-122 developed an engine fire that soon burned out of control. The crew of five ejected from the stricken aircraft which continued flying toward Syrian airspace, making it necessary to destroy the E-2C. VFA-132's command history explains what happened next. "LT William 'Maggot' Reilly of the Privateers responded. Upon receiving authorization to shoot down the aircraft, LT Reilly selected the 20mm gun of his *Hornet* and splashed the *Hawkeye*." This was the first and only "kill" achieved by an aircraft flying from the deck of *Forrestal* in the carrier's 37-year history.

*Forrestal*'s final deployment came to an end on 21 December 1991. On 5 February 1992, she was redesignated a training carrier (AVT 59), relieving *Lexington* (AVT 16) which was decommissioned after 49 years of service. After changing home ports from Mayport to Pensacola, Fla., *Forrestal* reported to Philadelphia Naval Shipyard, Pa., for a refit, and that is where she remains to this day. On 11 September 1993, AVT 59 was decommissioned.

If it is true that a ship like a person has life, then the following can be said of *Forrestal*'s life. At birth, she was the most powerful warship in the world. She did for carriers what HMS *Dreadnought* did for big gun battleships. *Forrestal* was the first supercarrier, and although she may have served only four days on the line, it was not necessary to risk her. By 1967, she had three sisters, three improved sisters, and one nuclear cousin to exercise the might of Naval Aviation. *Forrestal*, forever first in defense, had served her purpose.

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# Forrestal (CVA/CV/AVT-59) Deployments

## Shakedown

Guantanamo Bay, Cuba  
24 January to 31 March 1956  
ATG-181  
VF-41  
VF-21  
VA-86  
VA-42  
VC-12 Det 42  
VC-33 Det 42  
VAH-7 Det 42  
HU-2 Det 42

Tailcode: I  
F2H-3  
FJ-3  
F7U-3M  
AD-6  
AD-5W  
AD-5N  
AJ-2  
HUP-2

## Mediterranean

3 August 1962 to 2 March 1963  
CVG-8  
VF-74  
VF-103  
VA-83  
VA-81  
VA-85  
VAH-5  
VAW-12 Det 59  
VAW-33 Det 59  
VFP-62 Det 59  
HU-2 Det 59

Tailcode: AJ  
F-4B  
F-8C  
A-4C  
A-4B  
A-1H  
A-3B  
E-1B  
EA-1F  
RF-8A  
UH-25C

## Mediterranean

5 January to 2 July 1971  
CVW-17  
VF-11  
VF-74  
VA-83  
VA-81  
VA-85  
RVAH-7  
VMCJ-2  
VAW-126  
HS-3

Tailcode: AA  
F-4B  
F-4B  
A-7E  
A-7E  
A-6A  
RA-5C  
EA-6A  
E-2B  
SH-3D

## Mediterranean

2 March to 15 September 1981  
CVW-17  
VF-74  
VMFA-115  
VA-83  
VA-81  
VA-85  
VS-30  
VAQ-130  
VAW-125  
HS-3

Tailcode: AA  
F-4J  
F-4J  
A-7E  
A-7E  
A-6E, KA-6D  
S-3A  
EA-6B  
E-2C  
SH-3D

## Azores

(Suez Crisis)

7 November to 12 December 1956  
CVG-1  
VF-171  
VA-15  
VA-76  
VFP-62 Det 4  
VA(AW)-33 Det 42  
VAW-12 Det 42  
HU-2 Det 42

Tailcode: T  
F2H-3, -4  
AD-6  
F9F-8B  
F2H-2P  
AD-5N  
AD-5W  
HUP-2

## Mediterranean

10 July 1964 to 13 March 1965  
CVW-8  
VF-74  
VA-83  
VA-81  
VMA-331  
VAH-6  
VAW-12 Det 59  
VAW-33 Det 59  
VFP-62 Det 59  
HU-2 Det 59

Tailcode: AJ  
F-8E  
A-4E  
A-4E  
A-4E  
A-3B  
E-1B  
EA-1F  
RF-8A  
UH-2A

## Mediterranean

22 September 1972 to 6 July 1973  
CVW-17  
VF-11  
VMFA-531  
VA-83  
VA-81  
VA-85  
RVAH-9  
VAQ-135 Det 2  
VAW-126  
HS-3

Tailcode: AA  
F-4B  
F-4B  
A-7E  
A-7E  
A-6A, KA-6D  
RA-5C  
EKA-3B  
E-2B  
SH-3D

## Mediterranean

8 June to 16 November 1982  
CVW-17  
VF-74  
VF-103  
VA-83  
VA-81  
VA-85  
VS-30  
VAW-125  
VAQ-130  
VR-24 Det A  
HS-3

Tailcode: AA  
F-4S  
F-4S  
A-7E  
A-7E  
A-6E, KA-6D  
S-3A  
E-2C  
EA-6B  
C-2A  
SH-3H

## Mediterranean

15 January to 22 July 1957

CVG-1  
VF-14  
VF-84  
VA-76  
VA-15  
VAH-1  
VAW-12 Det 42  
VA(AW)-33 Det 42  
VFP-62 Det 42  
HU-2 Det 42

Tailcode: T  
F3H-2N  
FJ-3M  
F9F-8B  
AD-6  
A3D-1  
AD-5W  
AD-5N  
F2H-2P  
HUP-2

## Mediterranean

24 August 1965 to 7 April 1966  
CVW-8  
VF-74  
VMF(AW)-451  
VA-83  
VA-81  
VA-112  
VAH-11  
VAW-12 Det 59  
VFP-62 Det 59  
HU-2 Det 59

Tailcode: AJ  
F-4B  
F-8D  
A-4E  
A-4E  
A-4E  
A-3B  
E-1B  
RF-8A  
UH-2A/B

## Mediterranean

11 March to 11 September 1974  
CVW-17  
VF-11  
VF-74  
VA-83  
VA-81  
VA-85  
RVAH-6  
VAW-126  
HS-3

Tailcode: AA  
F-4J  
F-4J  
A-7E  
A-7E  
A-6E, KA-6D  
RA-5C  
E-2B  
SH-3D

## Mediterranean

2 June to 10 November 1986  
CVW-6  
VF-11  
VF-31  
VA-37  
VA-105  
VA-176  
VAW-122  
VS-28  
HS-15  
VAQ-132  
VQ-2 Det

Tailcode: AE  
F-14A  
F-14A  
A-7E  
A-7E  
A-6E, KA-6D  
E-2C  
S-3A  
SH-3H  
EA-6B  
EA-3B

## Mediterranean

2 September 1958 to 12 March 1959

CVG-10  
VF-102  
VA-12  
VA-104  
VAH-5  
VAW-12 Det 42  
VA(AW)-33 Det 42  
VFP-62 Det 42-60  
HU-2 Det 42

Tailcode: AK  
F8U-1  
A4D-2  
AD-6  
A3D-2  
AD-5W  
AD-5N  
F8U-1P  
HUP-2

## Vietnam

6 June to 14 September 1967

CVW-17  
VF-11  
VF-74  
VA-106  
VA-46  
VA-65  
RVAH-11  
VAH-10 Det 59  
VAW-123  
HC-2 Det 59

Tailcode: AA  
F-4B  
F-4B  
A-4E  
A-4E  
A-6A  
RA-5C  
KA-3B  
E-2A  
UH-2A

## Mediterranean

2 March to 22 September 1975

CVW-17  
VF-11  
VF-74  
VA-83  
VA-81  
VA-85  
RVAH-7  
VAQ-134  
VAW-111  
HS-3

Tailcode: AA  
F-4J  
F-4J  
A-7E  
A-7E  
A-6E, KA-6D  
RA-5C  
EA-6B  
E-2B  
SH-3D

## Mediterranean

25 April to 7 October 1988

CVW-6  
VF-11  
VF-31  
VA-37  
VA-105  
VA-176  
VAW-122  
VS-28  
HS-15  
VAQ-132

Tailcode: AE  
F-14A  
F-14A  
A-7E  
A-7E  
A-6E  
E-2C  
S-3A  
SH-3H  
EA-6B

## Mediterranean

28 January to 31 August 1960

CVG-8  
VF-102  
VF-103  
VA-83  
VA-81  
VA-85  
VAH-5  
VAW-12 Det 42  
VAW-33 Det 42  
VFP-62 Det 42  
HU-2 Det 42

Tailcode: AJ  
F4D-1  
F8U-2  
A4D-2  
A4D-2  
AD-6  
A3D-2  
AD-5W  
AD-5Q  
F8U-1P  
HUP-2

## Mediterranean

22 July 1968 to 29 April 1969

CVW-17  
VF-11  
VF-74  
VA-34  
VA-15  
VA-152  
RVAH-12  
VAH-10  
VAW-123  
HC-2

Tailcode: AA  
F-4B  
F-4B  
A-4C  
A-4C  
A-4B  
RA-5C  
KA-3B  
E-2A  
UH-2A

## Mediterranean

4 April to 6 October 1978

CVW-17  
VF-11  
VF-74  
VA-83  
VA-81  
VA-85  
VS-30  
VAQ-130  
VAW-116  
HS-3

Tailcode: AA  
F-4J  
F-4J  
A-7E  
A-7E  
A-6E, KA-6D  
S-3A  
EA-6B  
E-2B  
SH-3D

## Mediterranean

4 November 1989 to 12 April 1990

CVW-6  
VF-11  
VF-31  
VA-37  
VA-105  
VA-176  
VAW-122  
VS-28  
HS-15  
VAQ-132

Tailcode: AE  
F-14A  
F-14A  
A-7E  
A-7E  
A-6E, KA-6D  
E-2C  
S-3A  
SH-3H  
EA-6B

## Mediterranean

9 February to 25 August 1961

CVG-8  
VF-102  
VF-103  
VA-83  
VA-81  
VA-85  
VAH-5  
VAW-12 Det 42  
VAW-33 Det 42  
VFP-62 Det 42  
HU-2 Det 42

Tailcode: AJ  
F4D-1  
F8U-2  
A4D-2N  
A4D-2  
AD-6  
A3D-2  
WF-2  
AD-5Q  
F8U-1P  
HUP-3

## Mediterranean

2 December 1969 to 8 July 1970

CVW-17  
VF-11  
VF-74  
VA-66  
VA-216  
VA-36  
RVAH-13  
VAH-10 Det 59  
VAW-126  
HS-11

Tailcode: AA  
F-4B  
F-4B  
A-4C  
A-4E  
A-4C  
RA-5C  
KA-3B  
E-2A  
SH-3D

## Mediterranean

27 November 1979 to 7 May 1980

CVW-17  
VF-11  
VF-74  
VA-81  
VA-83  
VA-85  
VS-30  
HS-3  
VAW-125  
VAQ-133

Tailcode: AA  
F-4J  
F-4J  
A-7E  
A-7E  
A-6E, KA-6D  
S-3A  
SH-3H, D, A  
E-2C  
EA-6B

## Mediterranean

(Provide Comfort)

30 May 1991 to 21 December 1991  
CVW-6  
VF-11  
VF-31  
VFA-132  
VFA-137  
VA-176  
VAW-122  
VS-28  
HS-15  
VAQ-133

Tailcode: AE  
F-14A  
F-14A  
FA-18A  
FA-18A  
A-6E, KA-6D  
E-2C  
S-3B  
SH-3H  
EA-6B